

Unique Perspectives

Celebrating Diversity, Inclusion and Equity in the University of Missouri's School of Medicine | Volume 3, Issue 3

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Contributor's Notes:

Brought to you by the School of Medicine Faculty and Staff Diversity and Inclusion Committees. To be disseminated 5 times per year.

To nominate someone for the Spotlight or Give Me 5, or to submit D&I news and events, please e-mail:

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To learn more about the University of Missouri School of Medicine's diversity and inclusion efforts, click [here](#).

In the Spotlight: Alicia Brewer Curran, BS



Alicia Brewer Curran is the Director of Strategic Initiatives for the University of Missouri ECHO Autism Communities program and the Missouri Ambassador for the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) program, Learn the Signs. Act Early.

Alicia Brewer Curran launched her career in the autism field shortly after her son's diagnosis in 2003. At that time, her family lived in a rural and underserved area, with limited access to autism-specific resources. Samuel is now 21-years-old, and they live in a resource rich area but continue to face many barriers. Alicia hopes to help change through her work by raising awareness and understanding, and advocating for all people across the autism spectrum.

What are some of the biggest challenges your son and family have faced and continue to face?

Samuel's autism is not a type that is highlighted or that you hear talked about by advocacy movements. Samuel struggles greatly with verbal communication and requires continuous support to help him with daily activities. His limited verbal ability can be extremely frustrating for himself and frankly for others as oftentimes he is unable to verbalize his wants and needs. That frustration is often expressed through aggressive behaviors towards himself, for exam-

ple, self-injuries and aggression towards others. As you can imagine, these severe behaviors can make it difficult to form relationships with people, find employment, go to a movie, shop at the store, access health care, attend family events, travel, etc. The simplest, everyday activities are often not so simple for Sam or our family. We get very creative to support Samuel so that he can do things he enjoys, but sometimes the accommodations are more than we can provide and that limits Sam's ability to access community. Fortunately, we have been blessed with amazing educational, medical, and community professionals and support that help us make certain Sam can live his best life. However, it can be difficult to navigate the systems that provide access to these resources and these systems can fall short of providing what is needed.

Our family's story is not unique- there are many who face the same struggles, and it is time to rewrite those stories. As a society, we must do better at raising awareness about the 30% of people on the autism spectrum who are like Samuel and recognizing that although people with profound autism need a lot of support to ensure success, they have much to offer and deserve to have the best chance possible at living their best lives!



Alicia and her son, Samuel.

(Spotlight continued on page 2)

Activity Highlights

LGBTQ+ History~ On Thursday, June 23, the Pride Network Employee Resource Group (ERG) of MU Health Care presented [LGBTQ+ History](#). They opened with a video about a well-known but often misinterpreted event in 1969, the Stonewall Riot. While historians may never know who threw the first brick that sparked the Stonewall Riot, it was one of the first and most significant gay rights movements in the USA. “It is important for everyone to know about LGBTQ+ history,” Dr. Craig Rooney from the Office of Clinician Well-Being says, “and this community has been around for millennia.” The panel discussed how suppressing minority groups and belittling their experiences can lead to cultural incompetence and a lack of empathy in our society and how to prepare for situations that affect LGBTQIA+ people through education and awareness.

Emotional Intelligence~ July was Minority Health Awareness Month. The MU Health Care African Heritage Employee Resource Group (ERG) presented “[Emotional Intelligence: The Pillar of Relationships](#)” on Thursday, July 28. The discussion included four components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship/social management. Taking one of the many [Harvard Implicit Association Tests](#) is a great place to start for self-awareness. Recognizing the privileges some of us have had over others in life is another important step in self-awareness. “Acknowledging privilege is not about taking on guilt,” says HR Specialist, Ronesha Walker, “but it should inspire us to promote change.” We are all imperfect humans that make mistakes. If we can all strive to become more aware of our actions and emotional reactions, we can most certainly live together in a more harmonious world.

(Spotlight continued from page 1)

What resources have been the most useful for your son and your family?

People who believe in our son – family members, friends, educators, clinicians, and other professionals who see the amazing young man Samuel is before they see his disability have had the most impact on our entire family. Samuel knows when people believe in him, and he will strive to achieve more. When Samuel is successful, our family is successful. I am thankful for every person who sees what I see in my son- that he is an incredible person who has so much to offer in this world.

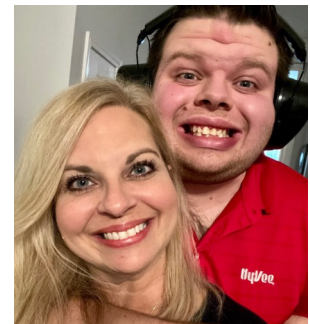
What would you like others to know about your son?

Autism is a spectrum. There are some people whose autism enhances their lives and there are some who do not see their autism as a benefit. Samuel’s autism brings him many challenges, and I assure you that Sam does not embrace his diagnosis at all. Let me be clear- I love Samuel just the way he is and would not change HIM one bit. He is an amazing human. However, I also know that he has to jump many hurdles, every single day, because of his autism and it can be difficult for him and for me to watch him struggle. However, though he faces daily challenges, he copes with it the best he can and moves forward. Samuel inspires me, as I see him face many challenges every single day, and yet the strength and perseverance he demonstrates allow him to achieve

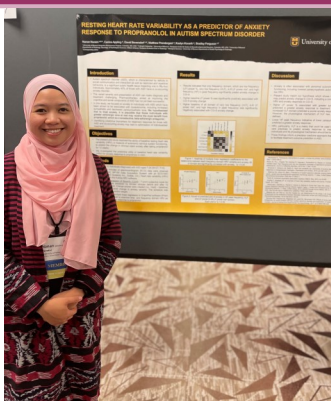
more than expected. I have learned so much from Sam and being his mom has made me a better person.

How do you encourage others to honor the uniqueness of each individual?

Everyone is unique, and each one of us possesses strengths and faces challenges. Focus on how you can leverage others’ strengths instead of focusing on what they can’t do. When someone is facing a challenge, I encourage you to not pass judgment, even if it is intense, as oftentimes it is for those with severe disabilities. Instead, think about what you can do to understand their perspective and journey. Though it may be different from yours, that does not mean it is less. Be cautious to make quick assumptions about the abilities of someone with a severe disability. Look beyond the disability and assume competence. Get to know who that person really is and open yourself to learning from them. Many assume that my son isn’t capable of many things. However, that couldn’t be farther from the truth. He is capable of far more than meets the eye.



Give Me 5!



Nanan Nuraini is a graduate student and Fulbright Fellow in the Cognitive Neuroscience Lab. To get to know Nanan better, we asked her these 5 questions:

1. If you could live anywhere or do anything, where or what would that be?

As a GRA, I work with people with autism and would like to have a copy of myself (who became a doctor) so I could help them better as both their doctor and a researcher.

2. What is your favorite food or restaurant?

Warung Bawean in Bandung, Indonesia. They sell rice wrapped inside banana leaves (*nasi timbel*) with fried chicken, tofu, lettuce, and the most delicious *sambal* in the world.

3. What is your favorite cultural/family tradition you celebrate every year?

I celebrate Eid with my family and Muslim friends after fasting for a month. We eat special foods together and give lots of gifts to the children.

4. Tell us an interesting or fun fact about yourself.

I always set goals in life and try my best to achieve them and pray. Fifteen years ago, I wrote a life plan to study abroad with a scholarship, then I got my master’s in England, and now I am studying for my Ph.D. in the U.S.

5. If you could make one change in the world what would it be?

I would stop the war. There is nothing good coming from it. Instead, I would create a peaceful world where people care for each other by developing “empathy” pills.

A Look Back...

In this issue, we want to shed light on individuals and families who navigate the barriers and challenges of autism spectrum disorder, but also highlight and acknowledge the wonderful diversity they contribute to our community. Join us as we take *A Look Back* at the Thompson Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders and its mission and purpose that has impacted so many families.

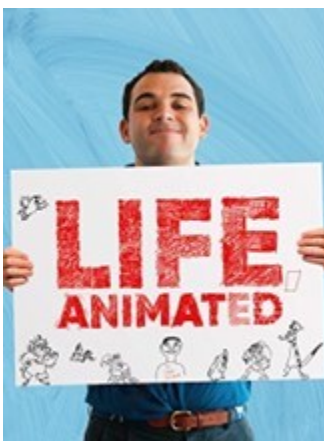
The Thompson Center is a multidisciplinary facility that provides a range of services all in one convenient location. With a generous gift from William and Nancy Thompson, the Thompson Center was opened in 2005. From the beginning, the Center's services emphasized family-centered care that is comprehensive, coordinated, compassionate, culturally sensitive and accessible for all. The mission of the Center is to integrate research, education, clinical services and policy to provide world-class care to individuals and families affected by autism spectrum disorder and neurodevelopmental disorders. The facility allows for collaborative research that will lead to early identification and treatment options for families.

A significant part of the Thompson Center's mission is to provide education and training not only to health care professionals but also to the community at large. The Autism Friendly Business program provides training to businesses in an effort to provide an environment that is inclusive of all customers. In the training, employees are provided strategies to support customers and/or employees who may be affected by autism. A webpage is maintained that lists businesses who receive the [Autism Friendly Business](#) designation by successfully completing a training course.

We applaud the Thompson Center for being not only a wonderful example of multidisciplinary excellence in clinical services, research and education but a Center that actively promotes the inclusion of all individuals and families in our community.



Brain Food



The documentary film *Life, Animated* released in 2016 is based on the 2014 memoir by the same name from journalist Ron Suskind. Enjoying professional success, two beautiful sons, and the home they had dreamed of, Suskind and his wife Cornelia found their lives turned upside down when their youngest son, Owen, gradually lost the ability to speak. Home movies included in the film show Owen's loss of

physical coordination and verbal fluency as a toddler. Owen received a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, and his parents were told he may never regain the ability to speak. One day, while enjoying a Disney movie with his older brother, Owen began repeating "only her voice," the words of The Little Mermaid villain, Ursula, demanding the voice of the mermaid, Ariel, as payment. Gradually, the exaggerated facial features and emotions of Disney animated movies, viewed over and over, not only provided Owen with an activity to share with his brother and classmates but provided a window into the world and words with which to express himself. The movie focuses on Owen as a young adult preparing to leave the residential facility that has supported his development. He shares his hopes and ambitions for a full and independent life while facing the challenges of his autism. *Life, Animated* can currently be streamed for free on [YouTube](#).

Calendar of Events

Upcoming events on campus and in the Columbia community



*The MU School of Medicine presents **Addressing and Reducing Cultural Bias in Medicine Curriculum** from **September 12—October 31**. Click [here](#) to register. Sessions held 5:30-7pm via Zoom on Monday nights.

*The MU Patient-Centered Care Learning Center and Granny's House presents **The Caleb Project and Science Club** sessions, for grades 5-12 to learn about science, medicine and healthcare, beginning **September 24** at 11am. For more information and additional dates, click [here](#).

*The **Mid-Missouri PrideFest** takes place this year on **September 24** and **September 25**. Click [here](#) to volunteer or for more information.

*Don't forget to tune in to **Thoughtful Thursdays** presented by the Employee Resource Groups (ERG) of MU Health Care. These important and informative sessions are held via Zoom from **12-1pm on the fourth Thursday of each month**.

*The Women In Medicine and Medical Sciences (WIMMS) group will continue to host their **First Friday Empower Lunches** starting back up on **October 7**. Look out for the announcement in your inbox soon.

Disclaimer: Event dates and times are subject to change. Thank you!

Are you GAME for some Diversity and Inclusion trivia? Be the first to scan the code and submit your answers to win some Diversity and Inclusion Staff Committee items. Contest closes Sept. 16. Winner will be contacted the week of Sept. 19. Good luck!

